

Theology of Care for the Vulnerable

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Introduction: Not Many Mighty

Our world loves the strong, the beautiful, the brilliant, the successful, and the rich. That's who you see in advertising, on the news, on the stage. We are surrounded by their images and trappings. We are supposed to admire them and want to be like them.

It is then a strange contrast to read St. Paul's famous words to the early Christian church: "Brothers and sisters . . . Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world . . . God chose the weak things of the world . . . God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things" (1 Corinthians 1:26–28).

This hardly seems like a strategy for building a great movement throughout the world, as Christianity was to become. But it is the truth: Jesus Christ gravitated to the sick, to the hungry, to the outcast, and to those at the margins of society during his three years of public ministry. His was a ministry to the vulnerable of his time. He excluded no one—including women, who were excluded from the religious practices of the day. Throughout history, whenever the Christian church has been most alive, it has continued this tradition of valuing the presence and gifts of women. Whenever Christian leaders have forsaken the weak for the strong, the poor for the rich, the unknown for the popular, the movement has stagnated and lost its way.

In this chapter, I will review the biblical story of God's particular focus on the vulnerable: women (especially widows), children (especially orphans), the elderly (especially grandparents who may be called on to care for their orphaned grandchildren), the poor (especially those who have suffered economic loss because of HIV), the sick and injured (especially those who suffer from the disability of HIV infection), and the stranger (the political, national, racial, or religious "other," and especially those who are strangers because they are HIV-infected) and how each one of these relates to our response to the HIV epidemic. After reminding ourselves that God has a special concern for these populations, we will ask *why*. And more than just asking why God cares, we must ask why we should care for the vulnerable. The answer has to do with both compassion and justice. It has to do with the very real value that lies within the vulnerable and victimized persons themselves. It has to do with God and our relationship to him. And, finally, it has to do with who we are, with our own humanity and character.

Vulnerability is defined as "susceptibility to emotional and physical injury; susceptibility to attack and/or subject to harm." Understanding how vulnerability comes about and who is most susceptible is key to understanding both why women are uniquely susceptible to the forces that produce it and why Jesus paid particular attention to women in general, and to vulnerable women in particular.

The Women

To be sure, there are women as powerful as any man could ever hope to be, fully able to defend themselves, win any argument, manage any complex situation, solve any problem, and lead any movement. It used to be a joke that British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was "the toughest man in Europe." Hillary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice are the equals of any American politician or diplomat in

memory, whether one agrees with their policies or not. Examples of female strength, power, and achievement easily could be given from business, the arts, the professions, academia, and sports as well.

According to the Bible, man and woman, equally, are created in the image and likeness of God, blessed, commissioned in partnership to “be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:27–28). Any differentiation and separation of their roles was a direct result of sin, not of the creational intention of God (Genesis 3). And in the great prophecy of Joel (2:28–29, cited in Acts 2:17), God says, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy . . .” Whatever differences in role and calling there may be between men and women in our history, these need to be understood as subordinate to the grand themes of Creation and Pentecost—looking back to God’s beginning and looking forward to God’s future. God continually surprises both his chosen people and the world by raising up leaders like Deborah; Esther; the virtuous multi-tasking businesswoman of Proverbs 31; the humble Mary, mother of our Lord; the female witnesses to the cross and the empty tomb; Lydia and Priscilla, prominent in the early Church.

Yet, apart from the apparent equality men and women possess in God’s sight, there are distinct biological differences. In childbearing, women experience pain and risk that utterly escape men. In becoming pregnant and in feeding and nurturing her children, a mother usually has a vastly greater role than a father. Biological differences often translate into cultural and sociological differences. The way that women throughout the world typically nurture and care for others contrasts with the often brutal assaults, abuse, and rape inflicted by men—often by marauding, drunken men or militias—not just their enemies but sometimes even their own families. Too often, male selfishness refuses to take any steps to protect female victims from sexually transmitted diseases like HIV. Women are infected with HIV by men and left to suffer the often fatal consequences. They are humiliated and sometimes ostracized—often by male church leaders—not for their own choices, but for what was done to them by males.

Where are the Christian men who will stand up and protect these precious women? Where are the fathers and elders who will not only set a personal example of virtuous behavior toward women and girls, but also speak up and act decisively to protect them from attackers and abusers? Where are those who demand an end to violence against women?

HIV infection of women and sexual violence are closely linked. The most common form of violence against women is called intimate (domestic) partner violence: physical and/or sexual violence that occurs between sexual partners who are not casual partners but who know each other well. In some studies—for example, in South Africa—over 50% of women who have HIV infection have a history of intimate partner violence. Too many think that intimate partner violence results only in visible and immediate evidence of abuse: bruises, broken bones, or tissue trauma following forceful sexual intercourse. HIV infection that occurs at the time of sexual violence may not become evident, however, until years after infection. Many are now of the opinion that HIV infection must be considered yet another form of intimate partner violence; but, unlike physical abuse from which a woman usually recovers, without treatment HIV infection is ultimately fatal.

We should not placate ourselves with thinking that intimate partner violence and rape are confined to resource-poor countries. Data compiled from the U.S. is revealing. The U.S. Justice Department estimates that one in five U.S. women will experience rape or attempted rape during her college years, and that fewer than 5 percent of these rapes will be reported. Over the last two years, more than 787,000 women were the victims of rape or sexual assault. One in five American high school girls has been physically or sexually abused by a dating partner. Current research indicates that 25% of women in the U.S. have experience physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former partner. The Institute of Medicine

estimated that 5 million women in the U.S. are physically, sexually, or emotionally abused by their sexual partners each year, and nearly 350,000 pregnant women are abused by their partners each year. Tragically, homicide is one of the leading causes of maternal deaths in the U.S. each year. The high rate of domestic violence in the U.S. has led some states to pass laws requiring mandatory reporting of domestic abuse when suspected by physicians and healthcare personnel. Despite all of the statistics, virtually no discussion of intimate partner violence occurs within the Christian church.

These numbers are sobering and certainly do not reflect the teachings of Jesus regarding respect for women. Given the extent of physical and sexual violence against women, the Church cannot remain silent—whether the violence occurs in countries distant from our own or within our own neighborhoods or Christian communities. When our Lord was confronted with an angry, vengeful crowd who dragged a woman accused of adultery before him, he protected her, spoke to her with respect, and sent her on her way with a challenge to “sin no more” (John 8:1–11). Jesus challenged the practice of easy divorce and urged monogamy, fidelity, and love. He welcomed Mary, Martha, and Mary Magdalene into his group of intimate followers. He urged that the homes of widows not be “devoured,” as the teachers of the law were in the practice of doing (Mark 12:40). When accepted water at the well from the Samaritan woman, his own disciples “were surprised to find him talking with a woman” (John 4:27, NIV). Paul wrote to Timothy—and James also wrote—to remind the church to care especially for women who had lost their husbands and were vulnerable (1 Timothy 5:3; James 1:27).

What women experience in modern times is obviously not representative of what God intended and can be completely opposite of the way Jesus treated the women around him. In our era in fact, many young women are so deeply disrespected as to be drawn or pushed into the sex trade—tragically, sometimes by their own families. All over the world, women are being silenced, if not abused, and often prevented from gaining education and freedom under the pretext of religion. And in large parts of the world, women are at extreme risk of being infected with HIV because of the irresponsible and often violent sexual misbehavior of men. How does God view all of this? How does God view the silence and complicity of the rest of us, even if we are not personally a part of the rapacious mob? How are we to protect our sisters?

The Children

Who could be more vulnerable than a child? Children are a joy to their parents and families, and to all around them. But children can also be demanding, noisy, intrusive, expensive, and difficult in different ways. Their needs and wants are many and frequent. They can’t do anything for themselves, at least in the earliest stages. They must be fed, or they will quickly weaken and die. They are prone to sickness, injury, and disease.

The extra layers of vulnerability upon some children may be consequences of cumulative effects of chronic circumstances or of a single catastrophic event: hunger/poverty, natural disasters, political or familial conflict, refugeeism, exploitive labor, or HIV infection.

If a woman infected with HIV becomes pregnant, her infant undergoes the risk of HIV infection as well. Without treatment, half of these infants will die by two years of age. Infants who do not become infected become orphans as they watch their parents’ health gradually succumb to AIDS. As orphans lose the protection of their parents or relatives, they become the targets of nefarious members of society who seek them out for commercial gain. It is estimated that each year there are more than 2 million children, most of whom are orphans, drawn into the sex trade. These children may exchange sex for food to prevent starvation for themselves and their siblings. Repeated sexual encounters such as these may ultimately

result in HIV infection, other sexually transmitted infections, and unwanted pregnancy. Additionally, a number of girls are taken by rebel militias, where the girls are frequently violated by members of the militia and by commanders, who take some of them as their “wives.”

Indeed, hunger and poverty drive many children to absolutely desperate measures. Natural disasters may also increase the vulnerability of children. In 2006, the U.S. government responded to 54 disasters in 39 countries—affecting over 70 million children. Disasters often result in the loss of shelters and infrastructure necessary to maintain stable food supplies and income for families. Disability or the death of family members further increases the level of vulnerability that children experience.

Often etched in our minds are the pictures of children caught in the midst of conflict. In 2006, the U.S. government estimated that there were more than 20 million children worldwide who had lost access to shelter, food, and basic services as a result of conflict. Aside from the basic amenities that these children lose, children in communities involved in conflict are deprived of their spiritual and psychological well-being and are at risk for separation from their parents as well as other sources of psychological, social, economic, and spiritual support.

Child refugees are among the most vulnerable populations in the world. As of 2006, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that there were more than 21 million refugees, internally displaced individuals, returnees, asylum seekers, stateless persons, and others; 9 million of those were children.

And as if misfortunes such as hunger, poverty, conflict, and refugeeism are not enough for children who survive infancy, a cruel fate awaits some in the form of sweatshops and unhealthy, dangerous work. Statistics from 2004 from international aid organizations estimated that there were 218 million children aged 5 to 17 who were engaged in child labor, of whom 50% worked in hazardous conditions.

The impact of HIV on families even further increases the vulnerability of children, stripping away the psychosocial, spiritual, and economic support that is vital to children’s well-being. Due to HIV, children can become alienated from their communities and schools, creating an entire generation of children with poor health, minimal marketable skills, inadequate levels of education, and nonexistent financial resources. HIV thus amplifies all of the negative factors that are associated with the perpetuation of poverty among populations that are already poor.

Two episodes reported in Matthew’s Gospel display Jesus’s attitude toward these matters. Both of these teach that children are to be viewed as treasures and not commodities for exploitation.

Then people brought little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there. (Matthew 19:13–15, NIV)

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Who, then, is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a little child to him, and placed the child among them. And he said: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.” (Matthew 18:1–6)

The fact that God himself would arrive in our world in the form of a vulnerable baby also says a great deal. Popular expectation would have the Messiah arrive like Superman, flying in and landing on Mt. Olympus. Instead he comes as a baby. And he warns that all of his followers, without exception, must become like little children if they would enter the kingdom of heaven. He warns in the strongest of language that, for anyone who mistreats a child who believes in him, it would be better to be thrown into the ocean strapped to a millstone. Ever countercultural, Jesus lays gentle hands on the children around him and blesses them.

Could anything be clearer? The children of the world—not just the children in my family, though that is where I must start—must be protected, welcomed, and blessed. Protecting them from HIV and other disease, from hunger and nakedness, from violence and cruelty, from danger and exploitation, from ignorance and disrespect—these objectives must be at the top of our list. This is not a cultural or regional issue, but a global issue in the eyes of the God of all peoples and nations.

The global impact of HIV on children is too frequently overlooked. While the emphasis is on the number of adults infected with HIV, there are 16 million orphans as a consequence of HIV infection of one or both parents, with 3 million new orphans added each year. This is a staggering number of children, overwhelming faith-based and other organizations that have historically cared for orphans. The creation of large orphanages—a traditional means of caring for orphans—is not only economically prohibitive but also contributes to the stigmatization of HIV orphans, concentrating them in buildings that are readily identified as, “That’s where HIV orphans live.” Orphaned children are better cared for in their communities, where they can interact with other children and receive the nurturing provided by family and community members. Providing support to family members to integrate orphaned children into a typical family structure—similar to foster care—has been found to be less expensive and emotionally, spiritually, and socially more effective. It is an opportunity for the Christian church to welcome children just as Jesus did. However, as with women infected with HIV, the Christian community has been slow to respond and, too often, has contributed to the stigmatization of HIV orphans by either ignoring their needs or refusing them a refuge through Christian ministries.

Tragically, orphans who are infected with HIV may be ignored, even by the largest and wealthiest Christian orphan organizations, because the cost of caring for an orphan infected with HIV is considered unaffordable. Additional drugs to treat HIV infection and the complications of HIV, along with more frequent physician and hospital visits, add \$300 or more annually to the costs of orphan care. It is easier to ignore the problems associated with HIV infection entirely either by not finding out which orphans are infected, or, if infected, by not offering treatment. The outcome is the same. Without treatment, 50% of orphans who have HIV will die by 2 years of age. It is hard to imagine this situation within the Christian community when the teaching of Jesus is clear regarding our responsibilities to children, whom we are to emulate if we care to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The Elderly

At the opposite end of the age spectrum from children are the elderly. We all know how vulnerable the elderly are to disease, to stumbling and falling, and to losses of memory, vision, balance, and other faculties. Primarily age-related conditions like Alzheimer’s and dementia can hit the elderly hard. Our culture of youth tends to deprecate the elderly. A lifetime of faithful service to a company can be terminated in a moment if a younger, more productive, less expensive replacement is available for hire.

It may seem strange to talk about the elderly in the context of HIV, especially since the HIV epidemic is frequently characterized as occurring primarily in young, sexually active adults. But as parents with HIV lose the battle and their children become orphans, elderly grandparents—especially grandmothers—are called on to become the sole caregivers for their grandchildren. Having raised their own children only to see them die of HIV, these grandparents again become parents, but at a time when their health, strength, and endurance is waning.

The Christian community must recognize their responsibilities for coming alongside the elderly who now care for young children without mothers and fathers. They need the help of the Church to handle the responsibilities of feeding, nurturing, educating, and caring for their orphaned grandchildren. These children need the spiritual and emotional support of the Christian community for a hopeful future. Again, it is an opportunity to demonstrate the compassion that is demanded from those who believe in the teachings of the Old and New Testaments.

Jesus criticized the religious leaders of his time for failing to care for their parents and violating the fifth commandment on the pretext of making religious donations instead (Mark 7:9–13). Paul instructs Timothy, “Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity. Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God” (1 Timothy 5:1–4). And just as God sanctifies infancy and childhood by the birth, infancy and childhood of Jesus, he sanctifies advanced age by the fulfillment of the promise of faith in century-old Abraham and Sarah! This is certainly not the way our culture would write the script.

It has often been observed that the commandment to “honor your father and mother” is not based on “because they have earned it,” but rather on the promise of God’s blessing. In our era, we must go against the trends and honor and protect our elders, especially as their vulnerabilities increase and they assume the unexpected load of having to act as parents for their grandchildren at a time when their own needs are increasing. HIV alters the family structure for the elderly: When their adult children die, older persons once again become head of the household. The problem is great. The number of grandparents caring for their orphaned grandchildren has doubled as a consequence of HIV. It is estimated that over half of the 16 million HIV orphans are cared for by their grandparents.

An understudied aspect of the HIV epidemic is the impact of the creation of hundreds of thousands of elderly caretakers. Grandparents are most often unprepared for returning to the responsibility of caring for children, either economically or physically. In caring first for their adult children with HIV and then also for their grandchildren, poverty and old age collide—creating circumstances of great need that neither they nor secular support systems are prepared, or sometimes even willing, to shoulder. Grandparents take on these commitments often willingly but also out of compulsion, realizing that, without their help, their adult children and their grandchildren may be abandoned. If their adult children have died from HIV, the grandparents become the sole caretakers of the orphaned children with little support from the community, the government, or other organizations.

In spite of the overwhelming responsibilities, elderly grandparents often remain hidden to aid organizations and perhaps to the Christian church as well. The fear of discrimination and stigmatization may contribute to grandparents’ not asking for assistance, even if it may be available. Additional obstacles include the generation gaps in knowledge about HIV and the difficulties the elderly might have in traveling

to health care clinics, administering medicine with failing eyesight, and advocating for their orphaned grandchildren.

International organizations such as WHO have provided recommendations for assisting the elderly in caring for their adult children and grandchildren. These include providing financial support; training social and health service workers in the special needs of the elderly; and providing psychosocial support, medical support, and special training for elderly caregivers. Conspicuously absent from their recommendations is the provision of spiritual support or engaging the Christian Church in meeting the needs of the elderly who find themselves in circumstances that overwhelm almost every aspect of their daily lives.

The Christian community, responding to the clear instructions given in both the Old and New Testaments to care for the widows and orphans and to honor the elderly, has a unique opportunity to respond to a much-neglected aspect of the HIV epidemic.

The Poor

The case for God caring about the poor, the hungry, and those with inadequate clothing and shelter is overwhelming. The laws of ancient Israel insisted that *everyone* should have a Sabbath rest—not just the boss or the wealthy. In addition:

“But during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what is left. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.” (Exodus 23:11)

“Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God.” (Leviticus 19:10)

“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the LORD your God.” (Leviticus 23:22)

“However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you.” (Deuteronomy 15:4)

Those who loudly claim that they want a “Christian country” might have more credibility if what they proposed had more of this biblical spirit and less self-serving market fundamentalism.

The Psalms, Proverbs, and Prophets make a strong and continual case for caring for the poor. Here is just a small sample of the biblical teaching:

“‘Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan, I will now arise,’ says the LORD. ‘I will protect them from those who malign them.’” (Psalm 12:5)

“You evildoers frustrate the plans of the poor, but the LORD is their refuge.” (Psalm 14:6)

“I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.” (Psalm 140:12)

“He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free.” (Psalm 146:7)

“An unplowed field produces food for the poor, but injustice sweeps it away.” (Proverbs 13:23)

“It is a sin to despise one’s neighbor, but blessed is the one who is kind to the needy.” (Proverbs 14:21)

“Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.” (Proverbs 14:31)

“Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done.” (Proverbs 19:17)

“And if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday.” (Isaiah 58:10)

“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.” (Isaiah 61:1)

Of course, Jesus and the early Church make the same case in similar language:

“Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.” (Luke 12:33)

“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.” (Luke 14:13)

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” (Romans 12:20)

“Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here’s a good seat for you,’ but say to the poor man, ‘You stand there’ or ‘Sit on the floor by my feet,’ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court?” (James 2:2–6)

“If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.” (1 John 3:17–18)

So often, those who suffer and who are vulnerable as children or as women are also poor. While the association between poverty and HIV is not entirely clear, it is quite certain that HIV pushes families and individuals into poverty. Poverty, in turn, reinforces people’s captivity to their vulnerable circumstances. It is not surprising that there is a strong link between poverty and the HIV epidemic, especially as it affects women.

Often the poorest households are headed by women, who, if they are HIV-infected, bear the burden of caring for their own health as well as that of their children, whether the children have HIV or not. When poverty and HIV infection converge, women are most likely to be overwhelmed by the spiritual, emotional, psychosocial, nutritional, and educational needs of their families. Without adequate economic and educational resources for their children, a new generation struggling with poverty is likely.

The aggregate factors associated with poverty are frequently termed “culture of poverty,” with the recognition that children of those who are poor often become poor in subsequent generations. Poverty is associated with low levels of education and literacy, and few skills that can be used to generate income. Thus, health and healthcare for people who are poor remains substandard and result in low labor productivity, further contributing to poverty. By definition, poor households generally have few financial assets, and thus they are often politically and socially marginalized. Such social exclusion makes it harder for families to garner appropriate economic and health resources. Women who find themselves as heads of households and mired in severe poverty may engage in commercial sexual transactions for economic gain but then find themselves infected with sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV, which further contributes to their isolation, stigmatization, and reduced ability to provide family support.

The poverty associated with HIV infection produces economic circumstances similar to those of any chronic illness by preventing individuals from living productive lives. Unlike many other chronic illnesses, however, HIV infection may affect multiple members in the same family, including the husband, the wife, and the children. Unlike other illnesses that may have a short duration, HIV is a chronic disease that affects an individual for an extended amount of time—in a situation where little or no medical help is available, often an eight- to ten-year period during which the person who is ill requires constant attention and support. Women and children who have HIV may be viewed as an additional economic burden to other family members and may be dismissed or subject to severe forms of discrimination. The local Christian church may also view these women and children as not contributing to the welfare of the church or as requiring substantial or even burdensome support from members of the Christian community.

Poverty also reduces the capacity of women to deal with the effects of HIV. For example, the likelihood of HIV transmission from a mother with HIV to her infant can be decreased if the mother formula-feeds rather than breast-feeds her baby, as breast milk contains significant amounts of HIV that can infect the infant as long as breast-feeding is continued. Under circumstances of poverty, the cost of formula is prohibitive. Although there are now potent drugs to treat HIV, the cost of the drugs, limited local availability of these drugs and transportation costs to health centers to obtain the drugs and care, usually prevents access to lifesaving treatment. Poverty even extends to an inability to pay for funeral and burial costs.

A child's chance of escaping from poverty is dependent on resources that are absent because of poverty. These resources—usually nonexistent or inconsistent—include education, marketable skills, socialization, access to financial resources, and loss-of-property rights. Large numbers of children who are trapped in poverty may adopt the very behaviors that contribute to poverty in the first place—young girls in particular engage in sex for money for economic survival, only to eventually succumb to HIV infection. The premature death of parents from HIV encourages children to marry earlier, drop out of school to support the family, and engage in hazardous work. When both parents die, the oldest child often becomes the head of the household, assuming full responsibility for the younger siblings.

The Sick

A sickness or injury can lead to various kinds of rejection by others. Worry about “catching” the infection, embarrassment and awkwardness, impatience—all of these reactions can leave the sick in a more vulnerable position than ever, precisely when they are most in need of help.

For Jesus, healing was central:

“Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.” (Matthew 4:23)

“When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ‘He took up our infirmities and bore our diseases.’” (Matthew 8:16–17)

“And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.” (Mark 6:56)

Jesus commissioned first his twelve disciples (Luke 9:2) and then the seventy (Luke 10:9) to do the same kind of healing. The early apostolic church carried on the same ministry: “Is anyone among you sick? Let

them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up” (James 5:14–15a).

It is well known how HIV has frightened many people away from its victims, much as leprosy did in times past. But the church of Jesus Christ must never leave the sick unattended, uncared for, and vulnerable. Healing the sick is at the very heart of our life and calling. Caring for women and children with HIV must be viewed by the Christian community as an opportunity to live out the teachings of Jesus.

The Stranger

Finally, we must note how the stranger is vulnerable. The stranger can seem mysterious and threatening at times—but the reality is that it is the stranger who is outnumbered and more vulnerable. The stranger could be someone of another race or nationality, someone who looks different or speaks a different language, or someone who practices a different religion. The ignorant among us will be tempted to play on their personal (and our own) fears and perhaps stereotype, stigmatize, or even attack the stranger. HIV contributes to individuals’ becoming strangers in their own households, friendships, families, and communities through stigmatization and isolation. Women who are HIV-infected become separated from spiritual, social, and family support mechanisms, forcing them to withdraw and internalize their concerns—thereby reducing their access to desperately needed support mechanisms. Even the support systems that are available are often inundated with the work of helping others with chronic diseases—often those with less stigma.

We must persist. God’s promise to Abraham (Genesis 12:3) was that in Abraham and his descendants “all peoples on earth” would be blessed. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, the stranger and alien are drawn into the people of God. In the accounts of Rahab, Melchizedek, Ruth, the Good Samaritan, the Wise Men (Magi) from the East, Cornelius—and even in the breaking down of the wall between Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2), and in the promise that in the New Jerusalem all the nations will be represented and all will bring their contributions into the city (Revelation 5:9—21:24–26)—there is a consistent, robust challenge to embrace the stranger, to show hospitality and care.

It is hard enough to care for those who are sick, for vulnerable women and children, for those who are poor among our own kind! But the problems transcend the capacity of each group to take care of its own. We need a collaborative effort among nations and organizations, including the Christian community, that cuts across our typical divisions and identities. Biblical faith challenges us to risk our own insecurities and fears and to reach out to the vulnerable stranger.

Two Basic Reasons to Respond

As we look over this perhaps daunting list of those who are vulnerable and see the need for a response, two reasons are immediately clear: compassion and justice. Compassion literally means “to suffer with,” to come alongside someone because we feel the pain they experience. We empathize and sympathize with the hurting. We identify in some way with their vulnerability and are moved to want to stand alongside and help, encourage, and comfort. Do we have a tender heart? Is the spiritual fruit of kindness and mercy manifest in our hearts and minds? We have received mercy, but will we show it to others?

But it is not just compassion that drives our response; it is also justice. The vulnerable have a kind of “right” to our help. The world in general thinks that “rights” are just political fiction: Governmental bodies decide what constitutional rights to grant their citizens; but what they give, they could take away. Biblical

people think of rights and duties as something based in God's will and judgment. It is God who grants human rights to people. Every man, woman, and child on the face of the earth has been created in God's image and likeness, and is the object of his redeeming love on the cross. This is why, ultimately, all people have a right to our care and to fairness and justice from us. So yes, we are being kind and generous when we reach out to help others; but we must always remember the other side: It is not just about kindness and compassion. These people *deserve* to be helped and treated with care and respect because they are God's own, beloved creatures.

To put it another way, we are showing our love for God and for our neighbor when we care for the vulnerable and needy. It is an act of love. But it is also an act of obedience. God commands and guides us to care for our neighbor and for the poor and needy. This is not an optional part of our faith—not a voluntary act of love and generosity alone—but an essential duty, an obligation growing from our faith and covenant with Jesus as our Lord and leader.

Valuing Vulnerability

One perspective not to be overlooked is the value of vulnerability as a means. Vulnerability is not an “end”—not the goal of life—but it is a “means” to the end. Let's look again at the passage in 1 Corinthians (1:26–29): “Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.” In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul famously wrote: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Our weakness and emptiness makes room for the reality of God to shine through. By reaching out in care and love to the vulnerable and hurting, we may experience what the Letter to the Hebrews describes (13:2): “Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” God has room to show up in the lives of the weak. God's wisdom is sometimes more easily displayed among people who, by worldly standards, are not so full of their own human intelligence and learning. God's smile sometimes can be more visible on the faces of those without the standard definitions of a beautiful or handsome appearance. God's creativity may have more room to emerge among those who are not the elite entrepreneurs in our midst.

By reaching out and investing our time and care among the vulnerable and weak, we may see truly extraordinary evidence of God at work. And not only will we leave with a greater blessing than we brought; we will be learning that lesson for our own lives: I must decrease so God can increase. I must be poor in spirit to make room for the kingdom of heaven to bless my life.

Conclusion: We Are All Poor; We Are All Redeemers

We who are so blessed—we who are by the world's standards, “rich”— have such an obligation and such an opportunity to serve our Lord and our neighbors. But it is crucial to remember the rebuke to the church at Laodicea in the book of Revelation (3:17–20): “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke

and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.”

The reality is that we are no better, no richer, no stronger than anyone else. We, too, are vulnerable in our own ways, and we, too, need help from others. Those whom we come alongside to help, we will find helping us in our own poverty and vulnerability. We come to wash the feet of others, but our own feet get washed as well. We teach, but we also listen and watch and learn. We give, but we also receive.

Genesis 1 teaches us that we are made in the image and likeness of God, our Creator. But our Creator is also our Redeemer. We must understand that we are made in the image and likeness of the Redeemer. So it is embedded in our human nature, our DNA, that we need to express creativity in our lives to be fully human. And so we must also find scope and opportunity to act redemptively to be fully human. God is love; we are made in the image of the God who is love. If we try to quench or stifle our love for others, including the vulnerable and those in need of our redemptive help, we dehumanize ourselves.

In the end, our biblical theology teaches us that we reach out to help the vulnerable (1) because they need it and deserve it, (2) because God commands and invites us to do so, and, finally, (3) because it is essential to our own life if we want to experience it to the full.

Additional Reading

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